A Philological and Grammatical Examination of the Lexical Possibilities in Matthew 25:46

1. Introduction: The Philological Framework

The translation of the New Testament from Koine Greek into modern English involves a complex negotiation between the source language's structural constraints and the target language's semantic flexibility. Matthew 25:46, which concludes the Olivet Discourse, stands as one of the most significant and debated texts within this corpus. The Greek text—*kai apeleusontai houtoi eis kolasin aionion, hoi de dikaioi eis zoen aionion*—presents a syntactic parallelism that has traditionally been rendered as, "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (KJV).[1] However, the precision of this translation has been the subject of intense scrutiny by philologists, linguists, and lexicographers who argue that the traditional rendering may obscure the nuanced, functional, and etymological heritage of the specific Greek terms employed.

This report undertakes an exhaustive, expert-level investigation into the grammatical and lexical validity of an alternative translation: **"And these shall depart towards the punishment of the aion: but the righteous towards the life of the aion."** This inquiry operates strictly within the bounds of linguistic possibility, setting aside doctrinal consensus or theological implication to focus exclusively on the mechanics of the Greek language. The analysis evaluates three primary linguistic clusters: the directional capacity of the preposition *eis* (εἰς) when governing abstract nouns; the etymological and semantic range of the noun *kolasis* (κόλασις) within Classical and Hellenistic Greek; and the grammatical legitimacy of rendering the adjective *aionios* (αἰώνιος) as the genitive nominal phrase "of the aion."

The investigation draws upon a wide array of lexical data, including usage in the Septuagint (LXX), Classical Greek literature (Aristotle, Plato, Theophrastus), Hellenistic Jewish writings (Josephus, Philo), and the papyrological record. By synthesizing these diverse strands of evidence, this report aims to determine whether the proposed translation is merely a possible alternative or a philologically superior representation of the underlying Greek text.

1.1 Methodology and Scope

The approach utilized in this report is one of historical-grammatical analysis, prioritizing the diachronic development of terms from the Classical period (5th–4th centuries BCE) through the Koine period (300 BCE–300 CE). Particular attention is paid to the influence of Semitic idioms on New Testament Greek, often referred to as "Hebraisms," which frequently restructured Greek syntax to mirror Hebrew thought patterns. The validity of the proposed

translation is tested against the standard rules of Greek syntax—specifically the laws governing prepositions, adjectival modification, and case usage—as codified by grammarians such as Wallace, Robertson, Moulton, and Blass-Debrunner.

Furthermore, the report employs a comparative lexical methodology. The meaning of *kolasis* is not derived solely from its New Testament occurrences but is triangulated against its usage in secular Greek philosophy and agricultural texts to establish its semantic domain. Similarly, the adjective *aionios* is analyzed not as a static theological term, but as a morphological derivative of the noun *aion*, subject to the fluidities of temporal and qualitative description characteristic of the Hellenistic era.

1.2 Textual Basis

The analysis is based on the standard critical text of the Greek New Testament (Nestle-Aland/UBS), which reads:
καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
Variants in the manuscript tradition are minimal for this verse and do not materially affect the lexical inquiry regarding kolasin or aionion.2 The focus, therefore, remains on the translation potential of the agreed-upon text.

2. The Semantic Range and Directionality of the Preposition *Eis* (εἰς)

The first component of the user's proposed translation is the rendering of the preposition *eis* as "towards" rather than the traditional "into." This distinction is subtle but profound, shifting the imagery from static containment or finality to dynamic trajectory and teleological purpose. To validate this rendering, one must examine the spatial definitions of *eis*, its overlap with the preposition *pros* (πρός), and its specific function when governing abstract nouns of state or condition.

2.1 The Spatial Dynamics of *Eis*: "Into" vs. "Towards"

In standard Greek grammar, *eis* is the preposition of motion par excellence. It governs the accusative case, which itself implies the extent of space or the terminal point of motion. Fundamentally, *eis* denotes entrance into a sphere or location.[4] However, the lexical range of *eis* is not confined to the interior of a space. As noted by classical lexicons (Liddell-Scott-Jones) and New Testament lexicons (BDAG), *eis* frequently indicates "extension toward a special goal" or simply "direction toward".[5]

2.1.1 The Overlap with *Pros*

In the Classical period, a distinction was often maintained between *eis* (motion into) and *pros* (motion towards). However, the evolution of the Greek language into the Koine dialect (the common dialect of the New Testament era) saw a significant blurring of these prepositional boundaries. *Eis* began to encroach upon the semantic territory of *pros*, frequently being used

to denote direction or orientation without necessitating entry.[7]

For example, in the papyri correspondence from the Hellenistic period, *eis* is found in contexts where "towards" or "to" is the only logical translation, particularly when used with animate objects or geographical locations where "into" would be physically impossible or semantically awkward.[8] This diachronic shift supports the permissibility of translating *eis* as "towards" in Matthew 25:46. If the wicked are "departing towards" a specific fate, the preposition marks the orientation of their departure rather than solely their arrival.

2.1.2 The "Pregnant" Construction (*Constructio Praegnans*)

A highly relevant grammatical phenomenon in this context is the *constructio praegnans* or "pregnant construction." This occurs when a preposition of motion (*eis*) is used with a verb that does not inherently signify motion, or conversely, when the preposition implies a movement that precedes the static state described by the object.[9]

In Matthew 25:46, the verb *apeleusontai* (from *aperchomai*) is a verb of motion ("they will go away"). When paired with *eis* and an abstract noun like *kolasin* (punishment), the construction is dynamic. It suggests a movement *into the sphere* or *towards the condition* of punishment. The translation "towards" captures the dynamic, in-progress aspect of this movement. It suggests a trajectory. Just as one might walk "towards the light" or "towards destruction," the use of *eis* here establishes the destination as the focal point of the movement.[10]

2.2 *Eis* with Abstract Nouns: The Teleological "For"

When *eis* governs an abstract noun (a noun denoting an idea, quality, or state, rather than a physical object), its meaning frequently shifts from spatial location to **purpose** or **result**.[6] This usage is termed the "telic" *eis* (from Greek *telos*, meaning end or goal).

2.2.1 Purpose and Result

Lexicographers Louw and Nida categorize *eis* as "a marker of intent, often with the implication of expected result," translating it as "for the purpose of" or "in order to".[5] A clear example of this is found in Acts 2:38, *eis aphesin hamartion*, which is widely debated but grammatically allows for "with a view to forgiveness" or "towards the remission of sins".[11]

Applying this to Matthew 25:46, the phrase *eis kolasin* can be understood as "with a view to punishment" or "for the purpose of correction." The translation "towards" acts as a bridge between the spatial and the telic. It implies that the departure is *aimed at* the administration of *kolasis*. If *kolasis* is understood as corrective (see Section 3), then *eis* functions to designate the purpose of the departure: they go away *towards* the process of correction. This nuance is completely lost in the static "into punishment," which treats the punishment as a container rather than a teleological process.[13]

2.2.2 The "Goal" Aspect

Comparison with other New Testament passages reinforces this. In Romans 11:36, "all things are *eis* Him" (towards Him/for Him), indicating God as the goal of creation. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, believers are transformed "from glory *eis* glory," indicating a progression towards a higher state.[15] The preposition *eis* marks the advancing point of the action. Therefore, translating *eis* as "towards" in Matthew 25:46 is not only allowable but aligns with a vast internal evidence base where *eis* marks the goal of a trajectory.

2.3 Grammatical Conclusion on *Eis*

The grammar of Koine Greek does not rigidly restrict *eis* to "into." The spectrum of meaning includes "unto," "towards," "for," "among," and "against".[4] The choice of "towards" in the proposed translation is lexically defensible on three grounds:

1. **Lexical Overlap:** The blurring of *eis* and *pros* allows *eis* to carry the directional force of "towards."
2. **Abstract Noun Usage:** With abstract nouns, *eis* denotes purpose or goal, which "towards" captures effectively in English (indicating inclination or destination).
3. **Dynamic Motion:** The verb *apeleusontai* establishes a trajectory, making "towards" a natural English equivalent for the directional accusative.

Thus, the first part of the user's translation—"And these shall depart towards"—is fully supported by the lexical and grammatical constructs of the language.

3. The Lexical History and Semantic Domain of *Kolasis* (κόλασις)

The noun *kolasis* is the pivot upon which the nature of the "punishment" turns. The traditional translation "punishment" is broad and nonspecific. However, the proposed translation "punishment of the aion" gains significant depth when the specific semantic history of *kolasis* is unpacked. The user's query asks if the vocabulary allows for this translation; an affirmative answer requires demonstrating that *kolasis* is not merely a synonym for suffering, but a specific *type* of disciplinary action.

3.1 Etymology: The Agricultural Metaphor

The etymological root of *kolasis* is the verb *kolazo* (κολάζω). In its earliest classical usage, *kolazo* was a horticultural term. It meant to "dock," "prune," "clip," or "curtail".[16] Theophrastus, the Greek philosopher and botanist (c. 371–287 BCE), utilized the term explicitly to describe the **pruning of almond trees** to check their wild growth and encourage fruitfulness.[18]

This agricultural lineage is crucial. Pruning is an act of violence against the tree (cutting), but its intent is life-giving and restorative. It is strictly distinguished from "felling" or "uprooting"

(acts of destruction). When the term migrated from agriculture to moral philosophy, it carried this "pruning" metaphor with it. To inflict *kolasis* on a person was to "prune" their behavior—to check their excesses and correct their character.[10]

3.2 The Aristotelian Distinction: *Kolasis* vs. *Timoria*

The most potent argument for the corrective nuance of *kolasis* is the rigid distinction drawn by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (1.10.17). Aristotle contrasts *kolasis* with *timoria* (τιμωρία), another Greek word for punishment.

Term	Greek	Purpose	Beneficiary
Kolasis	κόλασις	Corrective / Remedial	"For the sake of the one who suffers it"
Timoria	τιμωρία	Retributive / Vindicatory	"For the sake of the one who inflicts it"

Aristotle argues that *kolasis* is inflicted to improve the offender, whereas *timoria* is inflicted to satisfy the vengeance or justice of the accuser.[18] This distinction was not limited to Aristotle; it appears in Plato's *Protagoras* (324a-b), where Plato argues that rational punishment (*kolazei*) is never for the past deed (which cannot be undone) but for the sake of the future, to deter repetition.[20] Clement of Alexandria, writing in the Christian era, maintained this distinction, defining *kolasis* as "pure discipline" and *timoria* as the "return of evil for evil".[18]

3.3 *Kolasis* in the Septuagint and Koine Context

Skeptics of the "correction" interpretation argue that by the first century, the Aristotelian distinction had eroded, and *kolasis* had become a generic term for punishment alongside *timoria*.[17] Evidence from Josephus and the Maccabean literature shows *kolasis* used in contexts of capital punishment or divine retribution that seems final (e.g., 2 Maccabees 4:38).[21]

However, the persistence of the distinction in writers like Clement and Aulus Gellius (2nd century CE) suggests that the nuance was not lost, particularly among educated writers. Furthermore, even if *kolasis* broadened to include general punishment, the *selection* of *kolasis* over *timoria* in Matthew 25:46 is significant. The New Testament writers had access to *timoria* (used in Hebrews 10:29 regarding the "sorer punishment" for trampling the Son of God). The choice of *kolasis* in Matthew 25 allows for—and historically invites—the concept of restorative justice.

3.4 Grammatical Compatibility with "Towards"

The translation "towards the punishment" aligns seamlessly with the Aristotelian definition. If *kolasis* is a process of correction ("pruning"), it makes perfect sense to move "towards" it as a destination of refinement. If the punishment were merely a static state of torture, "into" might be the only natural preposition. The use of "towards" (derived from *eis*) reinforces the process-oriented nature of the *kolasis*.

Furthermore, translating *kolasis* simply as "punishment" in the user's text is lexically accurate (it is the standard gloss). However, the grammatical structure "punishment of the aion" allows the English reader to perceive this punishment as something specific to the Age, implicitly carrying the corrective nuances of the Greek root without forcing the word "correction" into the text itself. The translation remains formally equivalent while permitting the functional interpretation of "pruning."

4. The Adjective *Aionios* (αἰώνιος) and the Hebraic Genitive

The final and most complex element of the proposed translation is the rendering of the adjective *aionios* as the genitive noun phrase "**of the aion**." This moves away from the traditional qualitative/quantitative debate of "eternal" vs. "age-long" and instead offers a literalistic, structural representation of the Greek term's morphology and its Semitic background.

4.1 Morphology: The Adjective of the Age

Aionios is the adjectival derivative of the noun *aion* (αἰών).

- **Aion:** Defined variously as "age," "era," "epoch," "lifespan," or "indefinite time".[23] In the LXX and NT, it functions as the primary term for the great dispensations of time ("This Age" vs. "The Age to Come").[25]
- **Aionios:** Morphologically, this adjective simply means "pertaining to the *aion*." Just as *ouranios* means "pertaining to heaven" (heavenly) and *basilikos* means "pertaining to the king" (royal), *aionios* means "pertaining to the age".[24]

The English word "eternal" carries a heavy metaphysical load of "timelessness" or "endlessness" that is not inherent in the Greek root *aion*. The Greek language possessed a specific word for "endless" or "eternal" in the absolute sense: *aidios* (ἀΐδιος). *Aidios* is used by Classical authors and by Josephus to describe things that are strictly everlasting (like the imprisonment of angels in Jude 6 or the philosophical concept of eternity). Josephus explicitly uses *aidios* for endless imprisonment but *aionios* for the "age-long" glory of a temple or a reputation.[21] The choice of *aionios* in Matthew 25:46, rather than *aidios*, strongly suggests a meaning anchored in the concept of the "Age" rather than abstract infinity.

4.2 The Hebraic Genitive (Construct State)

The justification for translating an adjective (*aionios*) as a noun phrase ("of the aion") lies in the "Hebraic" character of New Testament Greek. Biblical Hebrew lacks a robust system of adjectives. Instead, it uses the **construct state**, where two nouns are placed together to form a descriptive phrase.[27]

- *Hebrew Example:* "Har qodesh" (Mountain of Holiness) = "Holy Mountain."
- *Greek Translation:* When Hebrew concepts entered Greek (via the LXX), translators often used Greek adjectives to represent these Hebrew noun chains, or used Greek genitives to mimic the Hebrew construct.

Consequently, there is a fluid interchangeability between the Greek adjective and the genitive noun phrase. *Zoe aionios* (Life [Adjective]) is the semantic equivalent of the Hebrew *chayei olam* (Life [of the] Age).

- **Grammatical Permissibility:** Translating the Greek adjective *aionios* back into English as "of the aion" reverses the Hebraic-to-Greek transformation, restoring the original Semitic thought structure. It is a valid technique known as "un-packing" the adjective. This is linguistically sound because *aionios* functions as a **relational adjective**—it identifies the relationship between the noun (punishment/life) and the category (the Age).[28]

4.3 Qualitative vs. Quantitative Meaning

By translating *aionios* as "of the aion," the user's text highlights the **qualitative** aspect of the word.

- **Quantitative:** "Everlasting" (Focus on duration).
- **Qualitative:** "Of the Age" (Focus on source/quality).

Scholars like William Barclay and proponents of the "New Perspective" argue that *aionios* primarily denotes the *quality* of the life/punishment—that which belongs to God and the Age to Come—rather than its mathematical duration.[24]

- "Life of the aion" = The life characteristic of the Messianic Age (divine, vibrant life).
- "Punishment of the aion" = The correction characteristic of the Messianic Age (divine, restorative justice).

This translation avoids the logical trap often cited by critics: "If the punishment ends, the life must end too." By rendering both as "of the aion," the translation correctly identifies that both belong to the same Age. The *duration* of that Age (or the things within it) is determined by the nature of the object, not the adjective itself. The "Life" is endless because it is the life of God; the "Punishment" may be temporary because its purpose (pruning) is finite.[30]

5. Syntactical Structure and Parallelism

The final test of the proposed translation is whether it respects the syntactic architecture of the verse.

5.1 The *Men... De* Construction

The verse uses the *men... de* construction (*kai apeleusontai houtoi... hoi de...*), which sets up a contrast or distribution. "These on the one hand... but the righteous on the other." The user's translation "And these shall depart... but the righteous..." accurately reflects this adversarial structure.[3]

5.2 Strict Parallelism

A common argument against disparate translations (e.g., "limited punishment" vs. "eternal life") is the violation of parallelism. If aionios means "eternal" in the second half, it must mean "eternal" in the first.
The user's translation, “towards the punishment of the aion: but the righteous towards the life of the aion,” maintains perfect mechanical parallelism. It applies the exact same gloss ("of the aion") to the adjective in both instances.

- It does not force a theological interpretation of "endlessness" onto the punishment.
- It does not force a theological interpretation of "temporariness" onto the life.
- It leaves the definition of the "aion" open, as the Greek does. This is a rigorous formal equivalence translation that respects the symmetry of the Greek text without engaging in "illegitimate totality transfer" (imposing one meaning of a word onto all its occurrences).

5.3 Table of Syntactical Components

The following table breaks down the user's proposed translation against the Greek text to demonstrate point-for-point grammatical validity.

Greek Word	**Grammatical Form**	**Standard Gloss**	**User's Translation**	**Validity Justification**
καὶ (*kai*)	Conjunction	And	And	Standard.
ἀπελεύσονται (*apeleusontai*)	Verb (Fut. Mid. Ind.)	Shall go away	Shall depart	*Aperchomai* implies motion/departure. "Depart" is a precise

				synonym.
οὗτοι (*houtoi*)	Pronoun (Dem.)	These	These	Standard.
εἰς (*eis*)	Preposition (+Acc)	Into	Towards	*Eis* indicates motion toward a goal/purpose. "Towards" captures the directional/telic aspect supported by papyri/classical usage.[6]
κόλασιν (*kolasin*)	Noun (Acc. Fem. Sg.)	Punishment	Punishment	Standard gloss. "Punishment" allows for the underlying semantic range of "correction/pruning" inherent in *kolasis*.[16]
αἰώνιον (*aionion*)	Adjective (Acc. Fem. Sg.)	Eternal / Everlasting	Of the aion	Grammatically valid Hebraic genitive rendering. *Aionios* = "pertaining to the *aion*." Preserves the root noun.[28]
οἱ δὲ (*hoi de*)	Article + Particle	But the	But the	Standard continuative/adversative

				structure.
δίκαιοι (*dikaioi*)	Adjective (Substantive)	Righteous	Righteous	Standard.
εἰς (*eis*)	Preposition (+Acc)	Into	Towards	Consistent with the first usage. Maintains parallelism.
ζωὴν (*zoen*)	Noun (Acc. Fem. Sg.)	Life	Life	Standard.
αἰώνιον (*aionion*)	Adjective (Acc. Fem. Sg.)	Eternal / Everlasting	Of the aion	Consistent with the first usage. Maintains parallelism.

6. Historical and Comparative Evidence

To ensure this translation is not anachronistic, we verify it against the usage of native Greek speakers of the era.

6.1 Josephus and the *Aidios* Contrast

Flavius Josephus (1st Century CE) provides a crucial control group. In *Jewish War* and *Antiquities*, Josephus discusses the Pharisees' belief in the "immortal" soul. When describing the imprisonment of the wicked, he uses ***eirgmos aidios*** (eternal/endless imprisonment). However, when he uses *aionios*, he applies it to things like the "reputation" of Herod or the "glory" of a temple—things that endure for an age or a long period but are not infinite.[21] This confirms that a first-century reader would distinguish between *aidios* (endless) and *aionios* (age-enduring). Translating *aionios* as "of the aion" preserves this distinction, whereas "eternal" collapses it.

6.2 The Patristic Understanding of "Restoration"

Early Christian theologians such as Origen (c. 185–254 CE) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395 CE) were native Greek speakers who argued for *apokatastasis* (universal restoration). They built their theology partially on the understanding that *kolasis aionios* meant remedial punishment belonging to the age, distinct from final destruction. While their theology is not

the subject of this report, their *linguistic competency* is relevant. That native speakers could read Matthew 25:46 and see "remedial discipline of the age" rather than "endless torture" strongly validates the grammatical permissibility of the user's translation.[31]

7. Conclusion

The question posed is whether the Greek grammar and vocabulary **allow** for the translation: **"And these shall depart towards the punishment of the aion: but the righteous towards the life of the aion."**

The philological data supports an unequivocal **YES**.

1. **"Towards" (*Eis*):** The preposition *eis* allows for a directional and telic ("for the purpose of") translation, especially when used with abstract nouns and verbs of motion. This is supported by the classical *constructio praegnans* and the usage of *eis* in the papyri where it overlaps with *pros*.
2. **"Punishment" (*Kolasin*):** While "punishment" is the standard gloss, the underlying Greek *kolasis* permits and historically implies "correction" or "pruning." The translation "punishment" is safe, but the phrase "punishment of the aion" contextualizes it within a specific eschatological administration that may be restorative (as implied by the root *kolazo*) rather than purely retributive (which would be *timoria*).
3. **"Of the aion" (*Aionion*):** This is a grammatically precise rendering of the adjective. It respects the morphological connection to the noun *aion* and acknowledges the Hebraic "construct state" influence on New Testament Greek. It captures the qualitative nuance ("pertaining to the Age") that "eternal" often obscures.

The proposed translation is not only permissible; it arguably offers a higher degree of formal equivalence (literal accuracy) than the traditional "everlasting punishment," as it preserves the ambiguity and semantic range of the original Greek terms without importing English metaphysical assumptions about time and infinity. It is a translation that respects the structural parallelism, the etymological roots, and the historical usage of the Koine period.

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